DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 345 300 CS 213 412

AUTHOR Shelnutt, Eve
TITLE Undergraduate Writing Programs in the 90's: Facing the Realities.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; *Creative Writing; Higher Education; Peer Teaching; *Reading Writing Relationship; Student Needs; *Teacher Role; Teaching Methods; *Undergraduate Students; *Writing Instruction; Writing Teachers; Writing Workshops
IDENTIFIERS Writing Contexts; Writing Development

ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been a growth in demand for undergraduate creative writing courses, but it is striking how unprepared students are for such courses. Many undergraduates are simply and naively "into self-expression" as if it required no prerequisites and nothing more than getting it onto the schedule at registration. Unfortunately the workshop method is almost always employed in the undergraduate classroom for these courses, in which students are required to submit for commentary texts which they have not been prepared to produce. The current cultural climate of America produces increasingly poverty-laden students in terms of writing teachers' imagined, necessary prerequisites, and students have been so exposed to the nation of creative expression as a "value" that they are surprised to find that it requires preparation and learning. Creative writing is, in fact, immeasurably harder than they think because the demands of form upon the shape of language and its "codes" of meaning is immersely intricate. toward intellectual passivity which society rewards, but which remains antithetical to the creative writer's true aim. A creative writing class which does not employ the workshop approach is described; it includes the following aspects: (1) a 2-hour formal lecture about short story form, which provides the basis of all that will follow; (2) weekly reading assignments of stories from an assigned text; (3) weekly writing assignments of formal essays concerning the stories read; (4) in-class discussions of the readings; (5) in-class exercises on various elements of stories, including group work for class presentations; and (6) at the end of the quarter, a reading by each student of one story from a collection of student-written stories, each student choosing the one she thinks is the best and stating the reasons for her choice. As a result of this highly directive and aggressive teaching approach student writing has greatly improved. The students also read well, speak with assurance about literacy form, and look forward eagerly to the next class in the writing sequence. (HB)

Eve Shelnutt
Department of English
Ohio University
Athens, OH 45701
(614)593-8965

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Eve Shelnutt
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED345300

UNDERGRADUATE WRITING PROGRAMS IN THE 90'S: FACING THE REALITIES

I doubt that anyone who has taught undergraduate creative writing for the past 17 years as I have has failed to notice not only the growth in demand from students for such courses but students' lack of preparation for them as well. Various cultural critics have speculated that, in a world that is seemingly incomprehensible, individuals seek to assert their individuality and sense of control over existence by means of creative expression--an analysis that may account for the so-called renaissance in American poetry and short fiction. I say "so-called" because I am not at all convinced that we are indeed experiencing a renaissance in imaginative writing in this country, even as I understand from my students that self-expression is one of their motivations for enrolling in creative writing courses.

On the other hand, students would be loath to tell their professor the rumor that creative writing is easier than, say, introduction to chemistry and, they imagine, more instantly rewarding. After all, such a confession would remove the undergraduate's hand from her forehead, a nakedness beyond comprehension in even this permissive age. But when I try to understand what preparation, imaginatively or actually, students have for studying creative writing, I come to understand that few undergraduates have conceived of <u>anything</u> as a necessary prerequisite. I doubt that the myth that imaginative writing cannot be taught has filtered down from the graduate students and many of their teachers--a myth, I might add, that novice writers and some faculty have, in my opinion, themselves strengthened as protection against failure of various kinds.

CS213412

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

No, many of our undergraduate students are simply and naively "into self-expression" as if it required nothing more than getting it on one's schedule at registration. Then what happens? Unfortunately, the workshop method so ubiquitous in graduate programs (unfortunately ubiquitous, in my opinion--a caveat I have voiced in several essays) is employed in the undergraduate classroom, along with a few exercises borrowed from composition.

Certainly the workshop method, which presumes a student text on the table for discussion, can and does improve students writing. But it also, I've discovered, leaves undergraduate writers in much the same condition as before in regards to their material and their relationship to narration, while, I might add, supporting theories of criticism that literature programs are simultaneously questioning and, in many departments, working against, as Morton and Zavarzadeh have pointed out in their article "The Cultural Politics of the Fiction Workshop."

That is, in workshops, students are being asked to produce for commentary that for which they have not been prepared nor have prepared themselves to produce, which is the problem with the workshop method that presumes a student text for discussion. Given the short history of undergraduate writing programs, I doubt that we can hearken to a halcyon time when current imaginative paucity was plenitude, when students who wanted to write had, for instance, <u>read</u>, but we can probably agree that the current cultural climate of America gives us increasingly poverty-laden students in terms of writing teachers' imagined, necessary prerequisites. Moreover, so advertised as a value has creative expression become that students enter our creative writing classes culturally so confirmed in their lack

of preparation for creative expression that they often seem unprepared for the humble work of learning. After all, have they not just spent a semester or two writing journal responses in personal prose in their composition courses and many literature courses? How much harder could it be to write a story or a poem?

The answer, of course, is immeasurably harder, because the demands of form upon the shape of language and its "codes" of meaning is immensely intricate and calls forth from the student a relationship to his or her interior self that few literature or composition courses are structured to develop. If, that is, what we are after is genuine creation and not simply reiteration, a distinction that most popular writing, most television and film productions miss. We are, I maintain, in an age of nostalgia in America, not simply because we yearn for, indeed demand, simplification of difficult problems and insolvable mysteries for the sake of happy endings--thus collapsing a sense of time, of history, of the future--but because, in our demand for solutions, we fail to create much that is new, in writing particularly, and nevertheless call some of these reiterations poems, stories, novels. Much of what is now termed imaginative writing is a new form of journalism or transcription--of what we have had before, of what we see before us with truncated vision itself reaffirming past visions and coherences.

We seem to have forgotten that a story, a poem, a play, a novel is meant to strike us precisely where we do <u>not</u> live daily, which is what Kafka meant by breaking open the "frozen sea" within us. How often, in workshops, do our students respond to a peer's story by saying that she "identifies" with the characters? Yet, of course, in "The Metamorphosis," Kafka renders the bug within a routine by way

of device, a heightening of the normal in order to throw into stark relief the piteousness of difference. "Identification" is the reader's trap, not his reward. I have become concerned, then, with what to do in undergraduate creative writing courses to take into account and to combat students' proclivity toward intellectual and emotional passivity, the kind that society rewards and that is antithetical to the creative writer's true aim.

First, I have abolished the workshop method in my undergraduate writing courses, on the basis that the blind can hardly lead the blind, an "elitist" move, to be sure, that asserts once again that the teacher is one who teaches, the legitimate question being how. In the absence of a workshop, the void becomes immediately visible: with what do I now fill class time? And the attendant question: how do I get students to like a class that has as its in-class focus not the emotional response to a piece of writing but an intellectual response to form, language under the pressure of form, the sources of a writer's material, the meaning behind the words "to create," etc.?

What my students do is, first, receive a two-hour, formal lecture on the short story form, with the stated expectation that they will take notes during the lecture in preparation for a question and answer period afterwards for additional clarification of the lecture. The lecture forms the basis of all that will follow. Second, students are given the assignment of writing 2 three-to-five-page formal essays a week on two short stories assigned weekly from the text. A word about the text: for several years I have chosen a single collection of stories by a single author, specifically Gina Berriault's The Infinite Passion of Expectation currently, alas, out of print, requiring me to lend students the copies I own as a gift from the author as we await

its being reprinted by a new publisher, North Point Press having now gone out of business. Berriault's collection is not easy--its focus is language and characterization and intricate moral questions; the stories do not pander to contemporary artifacts used in so much contemporary writing as a sort of short-cut to characterization nor do they offer a particularly happy view of contemporary society even as they are firmly rooted in them. Using the collection has helped me engender from students the best undergraduate stories I have ever received.

So: students are marked present in my classes only when they arrive with their two, typed and corrected formal essays. We have then what is rare in today's classes--a text in common for discussion that is not a student text. Too, I have the advantage of helping students learn flexibility of language within two forms, because students also produce three, full-length short stories during the quarter, which, as with the essays, I read and comment upon in writing, making suggestions for what each student should try in the next story or essay, encouraging while also pointing out by way of suggestion all that is left to learn.

This work is augmented in class by various exercises on, for instance, point of view, description, management of time in fiction, transitions, dialogue, etc. And augmented by students' group presentations. I put students into arbitrary groups of four and ask them to develop a one-hour class on any aspect of the story form that I introduced in my opening lecture, on the basis that students need to direct some of their own learning, perhaps precisely because I am directing so much of it.

Students work both in several classes and outside of class-- at the library and in planning sessions, for their presentations, which gives each group a cohesion that compensates for that which sometimes occurs when the workshop method is employed (but which, I might add, does not occur if students become overly competitive for the teacher's praise in workshops). Groups have in the past presented a class, for instance, on the way in which authors' varying uses of language changes the way characterization emerges in their fiction, using such diverse examples as fiction by Faulkner, Hemingway, Susan Sontag, and Donald Barthelme. Another focused on the use of imagery in fiction, again with examples; a history of imagery in literature, and in philosophically-laden fiction. All groups are permitted to give assignments to the other students as preparation for their presentations, and those assignments are completed in addition to my own assignments and deadlines, willingly, I should say. I as the teacher am asked to do the groups' assignments as well, which I gladly do. Students in each group also get together outside of class in order to produce a report of the work the group did in preparation for their presentation, as well as an account of the presentation as well. This assignment helps students to understand what collaborative writing is and how difficult it is for writers to merge their individual styles into those of other writers for a unified voice and form, even when the "culture" from which the writing arises has been more or less uniformly experienced.

In class, what we do is discuss all that students have done in preparation for class. I treat class as a place where students who have engaged outside of class with the problem of creating fiction come to discuss the issues they have encountered over the past week. This kind of teaching honors the students' intellects, their aspirations,

their wish to learn while teaching students that they have intelligence, ignorance, hope for themselves as expressive, as well as energy for the task they, after all, chose, wittingly or not.

At the end of the quarter, students are able to read one story by each student, collected in a packet, each student having chosen what he or she thinks is the best of the quarter. Students are asked to state the criteria by which they made their choice; they don't always, in my opinion, choose their best story, an opinion I keep to myself. It is interesting and an added dimension of their learning experience that students often re-think their choices and sometimes decide that various non-literary considerations guided their choices, which opens up for them a new set of questions or deepens questions they may have flirted with when having a story in for me alone to read.

I did not always teach this way, but I have, I believe, responded to my own despair as a writing teacher. I have not wanted to be in a profession that seemed to me to lack integrity far too often--one that was readily available to the inherently "talented" and culturally advantaged students but which left the less "talented" and culturally advantaged student simply slightly better off as a writer and reader but without a genuine understanding of what creative writing really demands and can elicit.

I give students book lists; I read all that they are willing to produce during the quarter; I talk with students about what it means to be a writer; I encourage them to attend readings; and, in general, behave as though we are engaged in a genuinely exciting enterprise

for which less that the best effort would be an affront to its demands.

I can report that my students' writing is much better as a result of this highly-directive and aggressive teaching. My introductory students write densely-textured narratives in stories that pose questions rather than answers them; that focus on characterization rather than on plot; that excite them about what they want to try next; that help them to become self-critical and thus to reap the rewards of their genuine encounters with their own unanswered questions. That they also read very well and speak with assurance about literary form is their bonus, as is that they leave my classes both eager for the next class in the writing sequence and properly humble before the task.

My work is greater than when I used the workshop method, but my rewards are also greater, not the least of them being my genuine interest when I reach for the waiting stack of student essays and stories--stories I once dreaded to read and essays that, before, weren't even written to be read. I am surprised at my own response to more work, but I think that in the 90's we <u>must</u> work more, for our students are increasingly culturally deprived <u>and</u> satisfied about it. I have focused in my teaching on how to disabuse students of their misapprehension about work, creative work in particular, while making them happy about the news that I bring. They <u>are</u> happy, because, I think, they are <u>legitimately</u> engaged, in a culture that has made so many students cynical, as if style without content could ever be rewarding. I am working on the <u>character</u> of my students, which, when invited to display itself, is affectingly available to be explored in fiction and in the dynamics of the creative writing classroom.